THE West IN Canada

Canada West Foundation

September 2003

An Action Plan to Address Western Discontent

Roger Gibbins, President and CEO

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The recommendations in this report are a distillation of more than 30 years of public policy research by the Canada West Foundation. **They are not our recommendations; they reflect the views of western Canadians.** *The West in Canada* draws from the two largest public opinion surveys ever conducted in western Canada – 3,256 respondents interviewed in early 2001 and another 3,202 in early 2003. It also draws from a multitude of research projects, the professional expertise of the CWF staff, and the insights of the CWF Board. The recommendations, therefore, are grounded in a wealth of objective research and non-partisan citizen engagement experience.

104-07029/

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ISBN 1-894825-23-3

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Introduction

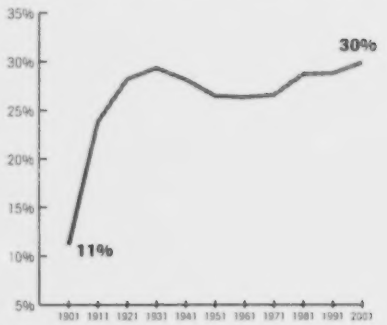
Canadians are on the cusp of a new political era as we approach a federal election in which most major parties will have new leaders. It is, therefore, an opportune time for creative ideas and initiatives, and to address the troubled relationship between western Canadians and their federal government. It is time to put things right for the West, and for Canada.

But what is wrong? Simply put, there is a deep-seated belief among western Canadians that when it comes to their interests and aspirations, the Government of Canada doesn't listen, doesn't understand, and doesn't care. As a consequence, the relationship is marked by suspicion and acrimony, and by national policies that often fail to account for the unique characteristics of western Canada. It is a relationship that needs to be fixed.

To this end, *The West in Canada* lays out a ten-point action plan for the Government of Canada to begin to address western Canadian discontent. The recommendations set forth are concrete and actionable. They are also consistent with national aspirations to improve the fairness, equity, and efficiency of the federation. **It is about a new deal for Canada, not just a new deal for the West.**

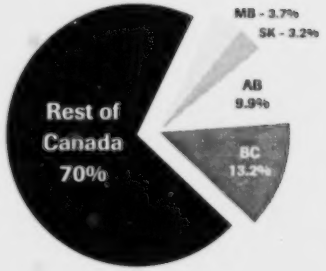
We recognize, of course, that there is no silver bullet – no single action or even set of actions guaranteed to eliminate western alienation. However, there is an opportunity for significant and immediate progress. This opportunity must be seized.

Western Canada's Population as a
Percentage of Canada's Population, 1901-2001 (Census Years)



SOURCE: State of the West 2003

The Western Provinces as a
Percentage of Canada's Population, 2002



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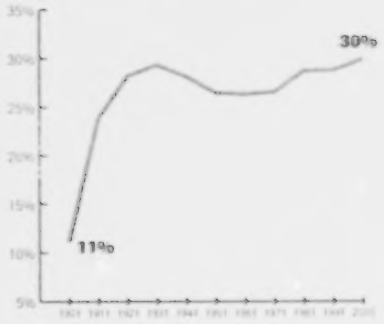

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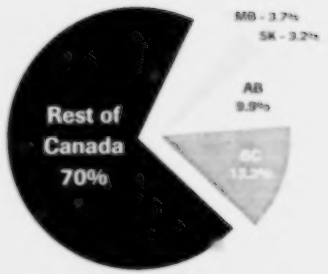


SOURCE: State of the West 2003

Any discussion of western discontent is inevitably entangled with a great deal of accumulated baggage, with disputes running back through the years and even through generations. Our objective, however, is not to rake over past grievances, many of which are symptoms of a more deeply rooted malaise. The task is to find a way forward, to build a new relationship based on the challenges of the 21st Century rather than on the grievances of the 20th Century.

Since 1972, 490,000 more people moved from other parts of Canada to the West than moved from the West to other parts of Canada – a net inflow of 16,000 interprovincial migrants a year.

It is important, therefore, that a fresh dialogue between western Canadians and their national government begin, one that is not dominated by the language of grievance. While we acknowledge the reality of western Canadian discontent, and indeed urge the Government of Canada to do so, we recognize at the same time that the West is a prosperous and vital region. Western Canada is home to 30% of Canada's population and produces 32% of its GDP. Not surprisingly, western Canadians are characterized by a strong sense of optimism, and by the conviction that they have a great deal to contribute to the national community. The ongoing frustration is that this potential is not being met, and that all Canadians are paying a price.

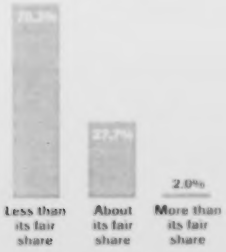
One last point of introduction: the West is far from homogeneous and there are often striking contrasts across the four western provinces in geography, economic activity, demography, and even prosperity. However, the challenge of western discontent cannot be made to go away by highlighting differences within the region. As the public opinion data cited below demonstrate, there is a remarkable degree of regional consensus when it comes to perceptions of the federal government. What unites western Canadians is their frustrated relationship with that government, and their firm belief in the West's potential within Canada. Hence we speak unapologetically about "the West."

Recommendations to the Government of Canada

1. Party discipline within the House of Commons should be significantly reduced.
2. The redistribution of parliamentary seats to reflect the 2001 Census should take place before the next general election is held.
3. The proposed Council of the Federation should be positively engaged by the Government of Canada.
4. There should be an annual First Ministers' Conference, structured to provide a substantive measure of provincial and territorial input into the agenda and format.
5. Institutional structures should be put into place to ensure effective provincial input into international trade agreements and policies that affect the western Canadian economy.
6. A review should be conducted of the regional composition of central agencies within the federal government.
7. The Government of Canada should conduct an audit of the regional distribution of program expenditures.
8. Appointments to the Senate of Canada should be made by the Prime Minister from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments.
9. The Government of Canada should conduct a comprehensive review of non-constitutional options for Senate reform.
10. The Government of Canada should strengthen its policy capacity with respect to the regional application of national policies.

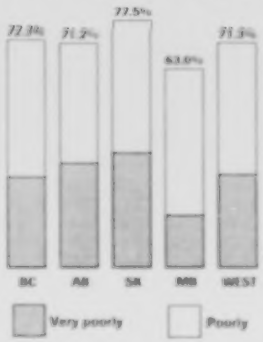
How much influence does your province have on important national decisions in Canada?

(western Canadian responses)



SOURCE: Looking West 2001 Survey

How well are provincial interests represented at the federal level?



SOURCE: Looking West 2001 Survey

Survey Question: Are the interests of your province well-represented, adequately represented, poorly represented, or very poorly represented at the federal level?

AN ACTION PLAN

While it is easy to identify specific policy disputes between the West and the national government, these are best seen as symptoms of a deeper conviction that western Canada lacks an effective voice in the national government. Western alienation is primarily about political voice, or the lack thereof. As Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said thirty years ago at the 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference:

> *When Westerners speak of alienation, I know they refer not solely to the lack of economic opportunity. Many are at least as concerned with the "lack of leverage" in national decision-making. They want a stronger voice in national affairs.*

If this is the essence of the problem, and we believe that it is, then the essence of the solution must be found in strengthening the West's voice in national political life. The West needs, and Canada needs the West to have, a renewed sense of belonging in the national community, and the path to this renewal leads through parliamentary institutions.

At issue is the effectiveness rather than the amplitude of the western Canadian voice. The goal is not increased regional spending, but a western Canadian voice that adequately reflects the region's demographic weight in a democratic society and ensures that national programs take into account regional circumstances and aspirations.

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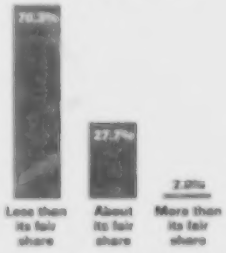

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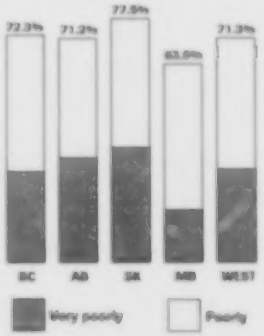

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House of Commons Reform

The primary conduit for a western Canadian political voice should flow through Members of Parliament (and not only through MPs on the Government side of the House). There is, however, a consensus in the region that this conduit is largely blocked. Individual MPs – be they from the governing party or opposition parties – lack both the independence and the power to speak up for their region and party discipline is seen to choke off effective political representation. Although this conclusion is not unique to the West, it has particular power for western Canadians who, for generations, have critiqued the operation of Canadian parliamentary democracy. It is therefore difficult to see how western discontent can be tackled without addressing parliamentary reform.

More specifically, party discipline within the House of Commons must be reduced. Here there are no constitutional constraints; party discipline can be reduced through the operating style of the new prime minister, and/or through more institutionalized means such as the three-line whip used in the United Kingdom. Committees of the House could be empowered should the political executive choose to do so. They could be given increased autonomy, and the capacity to initiate both inquiries and legislation.

Recommendation 1: Party discipline within the House of Commons should be significantly reduced.

House of Commons reform has been under discussion for decades; all that has been lacking is political will. It speaks directly to the western Canadian concern about the lack of an effective political voice in the national Parliament, and to the belief that MPs represent Ottawa to their constituents rather than their constituents to Ottawa. More generally, parliamentary reform speaks to the desire of all Canadians for enhanced representative government.

Free Votes and Party Whips

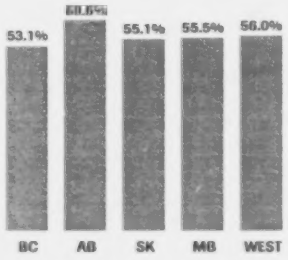
There is a longstanding call for more free votes within the House of Commons, and this is indeed a reform that could enhance the voice of western Canadian MPs. However, the greater challenge is to empower MPs on policy matters where the Government of the day has staked out a position. A three-line whip allows just that. Bills are identified at the outset as one-line bills (party discipline is encouraged but not required), two-line bills (party discipline is strongly encouraged, but dissent is tolerated), and three-line bills, which are treated as confidence measures. Only in the last case would defeat in the House lead to the resignation of the Government and a general election.

Electoral Redistribution

A common perception in British Columbia and Alberta is that electoral redistribution fails to keep pace with population growth. While some delay is inevitable given that the Census is only conducted every five years, it nonetheless results in the systematic under-representation of high growth areas in the House of Commons.

Recommendation 2: The redistribution of parliamentary seats to reflect the 2001 Census should take place before the next general election is held.

Provincial Governments Should Have More Power



SOURCE: Looking West 2003 Survey

Survey Question: Under the Canadian federal system, the Government of Canada has responsibility for some services and programs and the provincial governments have responsibility for others. In the future, should the Government of Canada have more power, the government of your province have more power, or should things stay as they are?

Decentralization

Some, although by no means all, western Canadians argue that they would be better-served by a more decentralized federal system – a prescription often reinforced by the ideological conviction that the size of government should be reduced across the board. This is an important debate that we recognize but will not engage, for even if the country were to embark on greater decentralization, the relationship between regional communities and the national government would still be critically important. We cannot envision a degree of decentralization that would render Ottawa irrelevant to the lives of western Canadians. Thus our focus is on the relationship between the West and the broader national community. If we can get that relationship right, then greater decentralization can be debated on its own merits, unencumbered with the baggage of western alienation.

Intergovernmental Relations

Although it is imperative that the West's voice be strengthened in the House of Commons, it is essential to recognize that another important channel of political representation flows along intergovernmental channels through provincial and territorial governments. As a consequence, steps to improve the tone and conduct of intergovernmental relations would also help address western discontent.

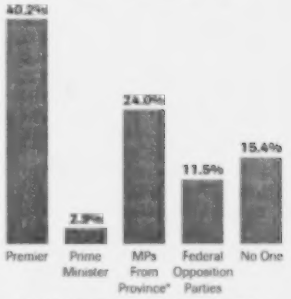
What, then, can be done? An effective strategy by the Government of Canada would entail greater respect for federalism, for provincial and territorial governments, and for their electorates. More specifically, this means working collaboratively with those governments on the creation of a Council of the Federation (a new body proposed by the premiers in 2003). While the Council will not eliminate federal-provincial conflict, it could lubricate intergovernmental relations and reduce unnecessary friction.

Recommendation 3: The proposed Council of the Federation should be positively engaged by the Government of Canada.

An effective strategy would also entail revitalizing the First Ministers' Conference (FMC), an institution that has been marginalized in recent years. Given that western Canadians see provincial governments as their most effective voice in national politics, revitalizing the FMC can only strengthen the perception, and indeed the reality, that provincial and regional interests are being heard.

Recommendation 4: There should be an annual First Ministers' Conference, structured to provide a substantive measure of provincial and territorial input into the agenda and format.

Who best speaks for your province in national politics?
(western Canadian responses)



*Includes both government and opposition MPs

SOURCE: Loulung West 2003 Survey

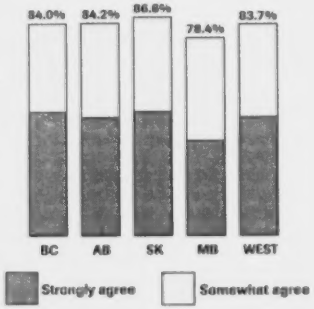
Finally, steps should be taken to ensure that provincial interests are more adequately taken into account in the negotiation of international agreements that impinge directly on those interests. The goal here is not a provincial veto, but rather a more effective provincial voice.

Recommendation 5: Institutional structures should be put into place to ensure effective provincial input into international trade agreements and policies that affect the western Canadian economy.

Strengthened Public Service Voice

Modern governance places great importance on the public service when it comes to the design and implementation of public policy. Thus while seats at the cabinet table provide political voice, so too does an effective presence within the public service. In fact, it can be argued that the latter is es ntial if national programming is to reflect unique regional challenges, assets, and aspirations. There is a general perception, however, that the composition of the federal public service fails to reflect the West's demographic weight in the federation. This perception must be investigated and, if found to be true, remedied.

The West is a Distinct Region



SOURCE: Looking West 2001 Survey

Recommendation 6: A review should be conducted of the regional composition of central agencies within the federal government.

We recognize, of course, that a systematic review of the entire public service is impractical. We also recognize that the regional composition of staff is much more difficult to determine than is the linguistic, gender or visible minority composition; regional identities are often very fluid in a country where people move around a great deal. The review, therefore, should be restricted to the small handful of horizontal, central agencies that have a uniquely important role to play in ensuring that regional perspectives and interests are brought into play in the design of national policy: the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, and the Treasury Board.

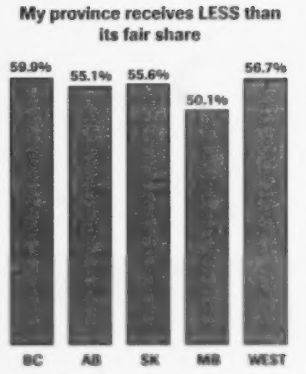
Equity in Federal Programming

Western Canadians are not calling for more federal money to be spent in the West, or for special programs; the call is for equity in national programming. A persistent belief is that federal program expenditures are inequitable, that western Canadians do not get their fair share of expenditures and, at times, provide more than their fair share of revenues. This corrodes support for federal programming, and for the federal government in general.

The perception of inequity must be addressed by any comprehensive approach to western discontent. Perhaps western Canadian perceptions are wrong. If so, there is a simple solution: open the books.

Recommendation 7: The Government of Canada should conduct an audit of the regional distribution of program expenditures.

This audit need not be conducted across the entire range of federal programming, but could be restricted to a handful of cases. Canadian Heritage, Human Resources Development Canada, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, for example, would provide reasonable case studies for an examination of the regional dispersion of federal government expenditures. The goal is to restore confidence in federal programs and, where necessary, to address regional inequities.

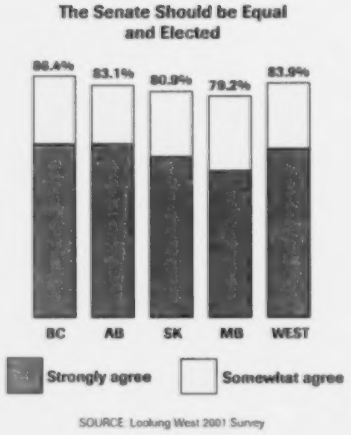


SOURCE: Looking West 2003 Survey

Survey Question: Thinking about all the money the federal government spends on different programs and on transfers to the provinces, do you think your province receives more than its fair share, less than its fair share, or about its fair share?

Senate Reform

Despite the efforts of some individual Senators, most western Canadians do not see the Senate as an effective channel of political representation – a perception that is shared by other Canadians. The flaws with the Senate are more deeply rooted and constitutionally entrenched than are those with party discipline in the House of Commons. Senators are appointed rather than elected, they are appointed by the Prime Minister rather than by the governments of the provinces and territories they represent, the Senate does not provide an effective legislative check on the House of Commons, and the distribution of Senate seats fails to reflect either federal principles or population. As a consequence, the Senate increases rather than moderates western discontent.



SOURCE: Looking West 2001 Survey

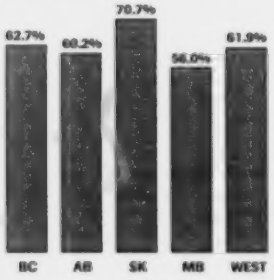
Not surprisingly, therefore, Senate reform is almost universally seen as an important part of the cure for western discontent, an antidote for the lack of an effective regional voice on the national stage. Indeed, western Canadians have come to support a radically reformed Senate, one that would be elected, equal in terms of provincial representation, and effective.

Senate reform has taken on such huge symbolic importance in the West that it is impossible to address western discontent without bringing Senate reform into play. This reality, however, poses a problem in designing a doable action plan to address western discontent. Comprehensive reform cannot take place without constitutional change, and at this point, beyond broad support for direct popular election, we lack a national consensus on the appropriate model for a reformed Senate. It may also be true that Canadians are not prepared to embark on constitutional change, and would opt for a badly flawed status quo over the perils of constitutional debate. In this context, the argument is frequently made that we cannot change anything unless we are prepared

to change everything, and because we cannot change everything at once without changing the Constitution, we cannot change anything.

We reject this argument; perfection should not be the enemy of the good. Incremental reform can begin without encountering constitutional obstacles. The Prime Minister could announce today that new Senate appointments will be made from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments, and within a matter of years this would become established convention. There is no need for the Prime Minister to specify how such lists might be constructed; some provinces would use electoral mechanisms while others would not.

My province is NOT treated with the respect it deserves in Canada



SOURCE: Looking West 2003 Survey

Survey Question: In your opinion, is your province treated with the respect it deserves in Canada?

Recommendation 8: Appointments to the Senate of Canada should be made from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments.

We are not arguing that Senate reform is a silver bullet that by itself will end western discontent. If, for instance, Canadians do not make substantial progress on House of Commons reform, then progress on the Senate front would provide limited traction on western alienation. ***However, Senate reform is a necessary part of the solution.*** Indeed, it cannot be anything else given the overwhelming regional consensus on this point. Senate reform has emerged as the centerpiece of the western Canadian reform agenda. Therefore modest, incremental steps towards the long-term goal of more comprehensive Senate reform would go a long way in addressing the widely held perception that the West is not treated with the respect it deserves. They would also move the country as a whole towards modernized parliamentary institutions more able to cope with the challenges of governance in the 21st Century.

Recommendation 9: The Government of Canada should conduct a comprehensive review of non-constitutional options for Senate reform.

Building Regional Policy Capacity

The West, like other regions, has economic and demographic characteristics that set it apart. While the uniqueness of the West should not be exaggerated, neither should it be ignored in the design and implementation of federal programs. What is needed is greater policy capacity on the part of the federal government to understand and respond to regional peculiarities. This capacity must be both political (achieved through parliamentary reforms discussed above) and bureaucratic.

Recommendation 10: The Government of Canada should strengthen its policy capacity with respect to the regional application of national policies.

Strengthened policy capacity should occur in both specialized agencies and central agencies. Again, the objective is to ensure that federal programming is sufficiently attuned to the unique features of the policy landscape in western Canada. This would include, for example, the relatively high proportion of Aboriginal peoples, the need for economic diversification, and a regional transportation network servicing a thinly dispersed population.

Toward a Western Canadian Policy Agenda

Western discontent is more, much more, than the sum of specific policy disputes. If it has more to do with the nature of decision-making within the national government – with equity and fairness – than it does with specific policy disputes, then great care has to be taken in suggesting policy solutions.

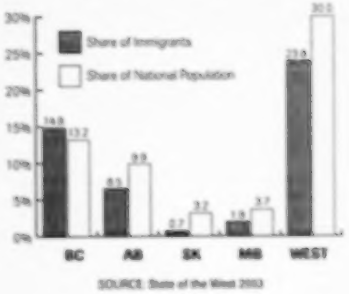
The West is a large, diverse, and complex political community, as is Canada itself, and thus a regional policy consensus is often lacking. As a consequence, any policy initiative will attract both supporters and opponents across the region. This explains why our focus has been on process solutions rather than on policy silver bullets; the intent has not been to design a policy platform for the Government of Canada nor to provide a critique of existing federal policies.

It should also be noted, however, that a number of policy areas may be used in the years ahead as litmus tests for the federal government's commitment to address western discontent. For instance:

- The development of a continental energy strategy in collaboration with the United States and Mexico is of critical importance to the West.

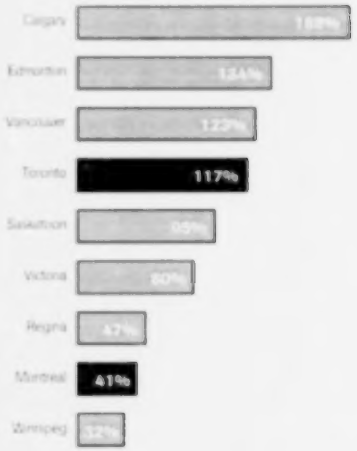
- Immigration is a significant public policy concern in the West; at issue is the region's share of immigration into Canada, the uneven dispersion of new immigrants across the four western provinces, and federal-provincial collaboration with respect to provincial nominee programs.

Share of Immigrants to Canada, 2002



SOURCE: State of the West 2003

Percent Change in the Population of Census Metropolitan Areas, 1966-2001



SOURCE: State of the West 2003

■ The new urban agenda is of great interest to the West. Indeed, western Canadian mayors have been at the forefront of this agenda. At issue is the degree to which federal urban programming initiatives will reflect the new urban face of western Canada.

■ Transportation has been and will continue to be a critically important policy concern in western Canada, where regional producers are often a long way from continental and global markets. The question, then, is whether federal policy will reflect the unique circumstances facing the West – a region with a huge land area but a relatively thinly dispersed population.

These and other issues will provide some of the policy lenses through which the Government of Canada will be assessed by western Canadians in the years to come.

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Conclusion

The Canada West Foundation believes that our recommendations, if adopted, will markedly reduce western discontent. Our goal is not perfection; it is to reduce discontent to the point where it no longer impairs the federal system, where the dead weight of western alienation can be lifted from policy debates across the region and across the country.

There are undoubtedly many other recommendations that could be made to address western discontent. Our approach, however, is more strategic than comprehensive. We have created a short list of ten recommendations that can be addressed within the term of a new government. Because it is impossible to address everything at once, it is critically important to find the right first steps, those that will provide the greatest leverage.

It is important to note, moreover, that the changes sought by the West would not come at the expense of other regions. They are directed at fair and equitable government – a goal all Canadians share. At issue is the effectiveness of Canadian national policy and its ability to accommodate unique regional challenges and strengths. The ten recommendations are offered in the interest of building a stronger West within a stronger Canada.

The ten recommendations also provide an objective yardstick against which the Government of Canada's performance can be assessed. The Canada West Foundation is committed to providing this assessment on a periodic basis in the years ahead.

Finally, it should be stressed that strengthening the voice of the West in national affairs is not the end of the process. It is incumbent on western Canadians themselves to ensure that their voice is worth hearing.

Find Out More About the West...

Building the New West: A Framework for Regional Economic Prosperity

Based on extensive consultation with western Canadians, **Building the New West** outlines five key priorities for ensuring the long-term economic prosperity of western Canada.

Looking West: A Survey of Western Canadians

The 2003 edition of **Looking West** reports the results of a survey of western Canadians. The report provides fascinating and timely insights into how westerners see their region and their country.

State of the West: Western Canadian Demographic and Economic Trends

Packed with easy-to-understand information, the new edition of **State of the West** is a must-have primer on the demographic and economic trends shaping the future of western Canada.

To order copies of these and other Canada West Foundation publications, visit us on the web at www.cwf.ca

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